



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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Belarus: Treatment of members of non-traditional religious groups, in particular Evangelical Christian groups, by state and non-state actors

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Although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Belarusian Constitution (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2), the government "restricts this right in practice" (*ibid.*; see also US 5 May 2004, 84). In 2002, the government adopted a "highly repressive" (*FSU Monitor* 1 Nov. 2002) religion law that places restrictions on minority religious communities while recognizing the central role of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (AP 9 Aug. 2002; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2) and the historical importance of "traditional faiths" in Belarusian society (*ibid.*). The Belarusian government has identified these "traditional faiths" as Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism (*ibid.*). Belarusian government officials and the media often refer to religious groups that are not "traditional faiths" as "non-traditional" and "sects" (*ibid.*).

The religion law imposes strict limitations on religious organizations that have been operating in Belarus for fewer than twenty years (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; AP 9 Aug. 2002), including restrictions on publishing literature, establishing missions, and holding organized prayer (*ibid.*). Few religious groups were able to register as a religious organization during the Soviet era, and therefore many do not have registration dating back twenty years (US May 2005).

There are reports that non-Orthodox religious groups and denominations experience "harass[ment]" (US May 2005) and "persecut[ion]" by the authorities (HRW 14 Jan. 2003). According to the 2005 *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, "officials continue to harass, fine, or detain adherents of various denominations" including Evangelical Protestant groups (US May 2005, 84). The 2005 *International Religious Freedom Report* notes that Belarusian authorities harass religious groups they "regard as bearers of foreign cultural influence, or having a political agenda," and that Protestants have "attracted negative attention" because of their perceived ties with the United States (8 Nov. 2005, Intro.).

The 2002 religion law requires religious groups to be registered with the government in order to operate within the country (US May 2005, 85; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Intro.). The 2005 *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* describes the criteria for registration as "vague," and therefore "facilitating continued abuse by government officials" (US May 2005, 84). Some minority religious groups, including a number of Protestant groups, have been unable to register under this new law, which has created problems for them with the authorities (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Intro.). According to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ), the 2002 religion law appears to be "an attempt at ending the inroads minority religions, especially evangelical Protestants, have made in Belarus" (*FSU Monitor* 26 Mar. 2004).

Irrespective of whether or not they are officially registered, some religious groups, including Protestant groups, have had difficulty buying or renting property to create places of worship (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; US May 2005, 85; Forum 18 8 Oct. 2003) and have had to meet in private homes (US May 2005, 85; HRWF 9 Jan. 2003). Many of the larger Protestant churches operating in Belarus have been forced to postpone public services as a result of being unable to rent or own property (Freedom House Sept. 2002).

"Non-traditional" religious groups have received fines for holding unregistered religious activities in private homes (UN 15 Mar. 2005, 10; HRWF 15 Dec. 2003; IHF 17 - 18 July 2003, 14). The 2002 religion law requires that religious groups receive permission from local authorities to use residential buildings for religious activities (Prima News Agency 24 Jan. 2003; HRWF 9 Jan. 2003).

There are reports of several Pentecostal evangelists being fined for conducting unregistered worship (UN 15 Mar. 2005, 10; HRWF 15 Dec. 2003; IHF 17 - 18 July 2003). In October 2005, a fine of 3,825,000 Belarusian Roubles, or "1,727 US Dollars," was handed out to the administrator of a New Life Church in Minsk (Forum 18 25 Oct. 2005). The amount of the fine represents over 10 times the average monthly wage in Belarus of between US \$100 and US \$150 (*ibid.*).

According to Forum 18, Belarusian police repeatedly detained Baptist street evangelists in 2004 in the town of Lepel for running a street library of Christian literature (20 Oct. 2004). One street evangelist was allegedly beaten by a police officer after being taken into custody (Forum 18 20 Oct. 2004). In 2005, religious literature was confiscated from Baptist street evangelists in the city of Bobruisk (Forum 18 15 Nov. 2005).

In September 2005, a Belarusian Evangelical church was denied registration and was self-liquidated (Forum 18 30 Sept. 2005). According to Forum 18, this is one of the first reported religious organizations to lose, against their will, the right to function in the country (ibid.).

Non-traditional religious groups face challenges when trying to invite foreign missionaries to Belarus (US May 2005, 84; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). Foreign missionaries have experienced difficulties in obtaining visas to enter the country and have experienced "harassment" from Belarusian authorities, especially if they come from the "West" (ibid.).

The Belarus Ministry of Education has approved school textbooks containing "discriminatory" language against various "non-traditional" religious groups, including Protestants (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; Forum 18 24 June 2003). In 2003, religious groups in Belarus protested a school textbook entitled *Man in the World of Culture*, which describes Protestant groups (i.e., Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses) and other "non-traditional" religious groups as "sects" and their religious activity as a "breeding-ground for fanaticism" (ibid.).

In 2005, Protestant religious groups protested the language used in another school book, *Basics on Home and Personal Security*, in which several religious groups, including Protestants, are referred to as "sects" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). The book includes a chapter entitled "Beware of the Sects" (ibid.).

According to a Center for Religious Freedom newsletter, in 2002, the Belarusian state television broadcasted a program stating that Protestant groups perform human sacrifice (Freedom House Sept. 2002). A state television program that aired in June 2003 declared that the Union of True Gospel Christians was a "satanic cult" (Prima News 15 July 2003). In April 2004, the state owned periodical *Znanyia Novosti* printed an article that identified a number of "non-traditional" religions as sects among which the Unification Church, the Church of Christ, and the Church of Scientology were identified as being among the "most dangerous" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. 2).

In 2004, the Union of Evangelical Christian Faiths reported a "growing number of actions by government authorities that prevented students from attending evangelical religious services" (Freedom House July 2005). The 2005 *International Religious Freedom Report* noted that teachers were questioning children belonging to the Union Evangelical Faith Christian and Baptist communities about their attendance at Protestant religious ceremonies (8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral Source:** International Christian Concern (ICC) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) were unable to provide additional information within the time constraints of this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International (AI), Charter 97, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Factiva, Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, World News Connection.

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